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ABSTRACT

The tragedies of September 11, 2001 have focused new attention on international education offered by U.S. postsecondary institutions. In the U.S., universities place their greatest emphasis on European studies followed by a focus on Latin American studies; this is reflected in the choices for study abroad of American undergraduates. Throughout the 1980s, students from Asia and the Middle East occupied first and second place among international students coming to the U.S.; since then, the Asian proportion has steadily increased so it exceeds 50 percent of all international students, while the flow from the Middle East has been superceded by that from Europe and Latin American. The virtual absence of a focus on the Middle East, as well as the considerable neglect of Asia and Africa, are cited as two especially troubling aspects of U.S. international education because of the considerable importance of these regions for the U.S. economy and international affairs. Because international education in the U.S. has essentially languished over the last decade, American colleges and universities are not well-prepared to help their students understand the events associated with September 11. (Contains 35 references.) (CS)

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Current Challenges of International Education

by William Cummings

September 11, 2001 has turned a spotlight on international education. Does U.S. higher education have adequate expertise in Middle Eastern issues to interpret recent events? How will foreign student enrollments in U.S. postsecondary institutions be impacted? These are the urgent questions now being asked by international educators. In this Digest, we will present some of the research that bears on these issues.

The Field of International Education

International education has a somewhat unusual position in higher education. While recognized as an important sphere of activity, it tends to be handled by administrative offices at the top of departments of languages and literature and international affairs. The scholars involved in international education usually have their primary involvement in other teaching and research. This leads to four distinctive characteristics particular to the field of international education:

1. There is little consensus concerning the guiding theme of the field as well as its scope. Should the field stress internationalization, transnationalization, or globalization (Barrows, 2000; Committee for Transnational Competence, 2000; Hilary, 2000)?
2. International education is not a prominent feature of the contemporary higher education experience. Using enrollment in foreign languages as an indicator, 16 percent of all U.S. college students were enrolled in foreign languages in the peak period of the 1960s; the proportion is currently down to 8 percent (Hayward, 2000, p. 6).
3. There is imbalance in regional coverage. The regions and languages covered at a particular institution are a function of idiosyncratic patterns of faculty recruitment. Nationally, there is reasonable coverage of Western Europe and Latin America and most European languages compared to limited coverage of Africa and the Middle East. For students enrolled in foreign languages, Spanish is the most popular followed by the other major languages of Western Europe; 6 percent enroll in Asian languages. Languages of the Middle East make up only 2 percent (1.3 being Hebrew and .5 percent Arabic). The languages of Africa constitute only 0.15 percent of enrollments.
4. Because international education is not a primary concern of most scholars in the field, research is somewhat sporadic, non-cumulative, and tends to be carried out by national organizations as part of advocacy projects (e.g. Lambert, 1989; Brecht and Rivers, 2000). The most recent example is the American Council of Education?s (ACE?s) ?Internationalization of Higher Education: A Status Report? (Hayward, 2000).

Advocates for International Education

According to a recent survey supported by ACE (2000), 90 percent of the U.S. adult population believe it is important for their children or young people to have broad knowledge of international issues and over 70 percent believe that college students should be required to study a foreign language if they do not know one.

Top corporate executives also are reported to be very positive about international education (Andersen, 1988), though corporate recruiters tend to see less value in international education or foreign language skills (Hawkins and Cummings, 2000).

The Value of International Education

There is evidence that international education contributes to students? intellectual and personal development. One survey conducted in the mid-1980s found that students who participated in study abroad programs exhibited higher knowledge levels (Barrows, 1981). Studies also report that students who participate in study abroad have improved language skills (Opper, Teichler, and Carlson, 1990). Other studies indicate that students who have several years of a second language have a better vocabulary and are more expressive and creative writers (summarized in Masuyama, 2000).

While studies project a future need for international knowledge in the labor force (Bikson et al, 1995), there is little evidence that training in international education leads to better job opportunities or income for college graduates. Indeed, one survey of U.S. job recruiters indicates they prefer students with domestic work experience over those with international work experience (Van Hoot, 1999). However, Hayward (2000) reports that the proportion of federal job announcements that indicate a preference for multilingual recruits has increased in recent years.

Support for International Education

In that international education is thought both to benefit the individuals who participate in these experiences and the nations from which they come or go, it is expected that international education would receive both public and private support. Indeed, public support from government and foundation sources has played a major role in the expansion of U.S. international education during the postwar period. But from the mid-seventies until today, the level of federal support has generally declined.

While there are no comprehensive reports of state funding for international education, state funding for higher education on the whole (as a proportion of all state allocations) has decreased over the last decade (Hayward, 2000).

Emphasis in International Education

U.S. universities place their greatest emphasis on European studies followed by a focus on Latin American studies, and this is reflected in the choices for study abroad of American undergraduates. On the other hand, through the 1980s, students from Asia and the Middle East occupied first and second place among international students coming to the U.S. (IIE, annual); since then, the Asian proportion has steadily increased so it exceeds 50 percent of all international students, while the flow from the Middle East has been superceded by that from Europe and Latin America. Cummings (1991), focusing on the Asian student market, found that such factors as the amount of U.S. technical assistance devoted to a country and the volume of foreign investment and trade going to that country from the U.S. had a strong influence on the likelihood that young people from that country would seek study in the U.S.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of U.S. international education is the virtual absence of a focus on the Middle East as well as the considerable neglect of Asia and Africa. The major exception is a very recent upturn in study abroad in Japan and China (Davis, 2000). The lack of a focus on these areas is especially troubling when one considers the considerable importance of these regions for the U.S. economy and international affairs.

The Future Inflow of Foreign Students

In the wake of September 11th, some national leaders proposed stricter controls on international students. Increased regulation may slow down the flow of international students, though recent experience with new regulations such as the international student tax suggests that the effect of new rules on the volume of student inflow may not necessarily be very great.

Fear for personal safety is also perceived as a potential damper on the inflow of international students to the U.S. Students from the Middle East may be apprehensive about studying in the U.S. because of concern about personal harassment. While this is a realistic concern, it should be noted that

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the Middle East's share of all international students has been relatively small and has been declining in recent years. More troubling may be the concerns of potential students from East Asia where there is a high premium on personal safety. When a Japanese student who mistakenly visited a California home was shot three years ago, the story was widely publicized in the Japanese press and had a definite short-term effect on applications.

While the current focus is primarily on fear, economic conditions have historically had the greatest impact on international education. The drop in the value of Asian currencies in the early 1990s led to a sharp decline in new students from that area. The current world recession is certain to have a significant short-term impact on foreign student enrollments. Given the worldwide scope of the recession, there is no reason to expect particular regional biases in this downturn.

Conclusion

Because international education in the U.S. has essentially languished over the last decade, American colleges and universities are not well-prepared to help their students understand the events associated with September 11. New regulations may make it more difficult for Middle Eastern, and well as other international students, to study in the U.S. However, more salient in impact on the future flow of students to the U.S. is likely to be the extent to which the U.S. markets its educational opportunities and the overall state of the world economy which influences the affordability of pursuing studies in the U.S.

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